



**Name of Project:** Pennsylvania SeniorLAW Helpline

**Name of Organization:** SeniorLAW Center, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

**Principle of Choices for Independence:** Empowerment/Access to Information and Services

### **Description**

The Pennsylvania SeniorLAW Helpline makes it easier for older people, their families and others to learn about and access existing services and supports by providing free and confidential legal information, advice and referrals to Pennsylvania's 2.4 million elderly and by reaching out to providers of services to senior citizens throughout the state.

While the Helpline is available to all of the state's residents who are 60 years and older, the project focuses on low-income, isolated, cultural/racial minorities, and elders with limited English or limited education. There is no other statewide free legal service responding to the critical wide-ranging legal concerns of Pennsylvania's seniors.

The objectives of the project are: 1) to provide accessible legal advice, information, and education to increased numbers of Pennsylvania seniors and their families, using established best practices; 2) to provide focused outreach and education to target language and cultural minorities to increase their use of the Helpline and related services; 3) to strengthen linkages with and increase referrals from community, faith-based, and immigrant organizations that serve vulnerable seniors; and 4) to develop new educational and pro bono resources, using new technological tools, to better serve Pennsylvania's vulnerable seniors in a way that maximizes limited resources.

The Helpline has experienced an exploding demand in the past year. In 2006 alone, the Pennsylvania SeniorLAW Helpline served 1,127 seniors with 1,266 legal problems. The Helpline has served seniors in all 67 counties of Pennsylvania. In addition, the Helpline provided legal information and referrals to over 400 family members, social workers, and others who serve Pennsylvania seniors.

The Helpline gives Pennsylvania seniors legal information, advice and referrals on a wide range of legal issues, including:

- Wills and other estate planning matters,
- Consumer problems like credit and debt,
- Medicare, Medicaid and other health insurance concerns,
- Housing issues, including both landlord-tenant disputes and homeownership problems,
- Family law, including support, divorce and grandparents raising grandchildren

The Pennsylvania SeniorLAW Helpline has partnerships with many agencies and organizations including Pennsylvania Immigration & Citizenship Coalition, Greater Philadelphia Asian Social Services Association, Pennsylvania Legal Aid Network, Pennsylvania Council of Churches, Philadelphia Corporation for Aging, Pennsylvania Association of Area Agencies on Aging, Law Firm of Saul Ewing LLP, Pennsylvania Bar Association and Pennsylvania Department of Aging. By partnering with these membership and service provider organizations and coalitions, word can be effectively spread about the Helpline, thereby making it easier for older people, their families and others to learn about and access existing services and supports.

In addition, the Helpline works with the Michigan Pension Rights Project (MPRP), a highly effective partnership that enables them to provide quality services and referrals for Pennsylvania seniors who need expert advice and/or advocacy with matters involving pensions and other retirement benefits. MPRP attorneys focus exclusively on pension work; through this partnership, these attorneys handle cases of Pennsylvania seniors.

Some outcomes of the Project include multi-lingual outreach to seniors and to the media, a telephone interpretation service making 150 languages immediately accessible, a pro bono panel in partnership with a law firm with offices in Philadelphia and Harrisburg, a comprehensive directory of legal resources for seniors in Pennsylvania and an electronic newsletter. The Helpline's increased outreach to particularly vulnerable seniors has been effective as the number of limited English speaking seniors has greatly increased in the past year, and currently about 15-20% of callers are from cultural, ethnic or linguistic minority groups. Similarly, rural and otherwise isolated seniors have reported that they learned of the service from various local service providers.

The Helpline provides access for seniors that traditional legal services offices cannot, in recognition of the distinct challenges and hardships facing seniors and obstacles to access, including obstacles of mobility, transportation, increasing prevalence of physical disabilities, cognitive impairment, and issues of dependence on others for daily care. SeniorLAW Center and the Pennsylvania SeniorLAW Helpline are founding members of the National Association of Senior Legal Hotlines and serve on the leadership of this national coalition working to increase legal services to seniors in the United States and to assist organizations in other states to develop and effectively implement senior helplines.

For more information about the SeniorLaw Center, please visit <http://www.seniorlawcenter.org> or contact Sue Wasserkrug at 215-988-1244 or by email at [swasserkrug@seniorlawcenter.org](mailto:swasserkrug@seniorlawcenter.org)

